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Medical Oxygen Fueled Shrewsbury and Haverhill Fatal Fires
Statewide Campaign on Home Oxygen Safety

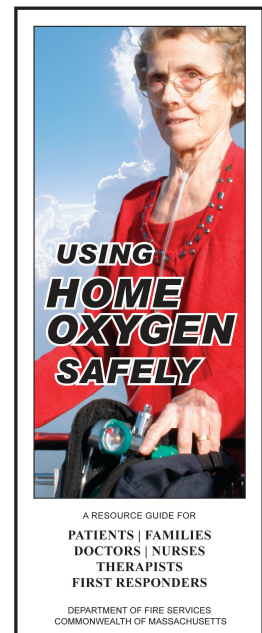
State Fire Marshal Stephen D. Coan and Shrewsbury Fire Chief James M. Vuona said that home medical oxygen played a significant role in the February 9, 2012 fire at 357 South Quinsigamond Avenue that took the life of Paula Shumway. Medical oxygen fueled a Haverhill fatal fire at 477 Washington Street on March 7 whose cause is still under investigation.

Coan said, "Oxygen soaks into bedding, clothes, hair, furniture and the air, creating an oxygen-enriched environment. This makes things catch fire more easily, fire spread faster and burn hotter. As more and more people are bringing medical oxygen into the home, they need to understand the new fire risks they also bring into the home."

Investigators have determined that the Shrewsbury fire started on the bed in the bedroom. There was evidence of a melted glass ashtray on the bed and electrical and arson causes have been ruled out. The fire was jointly investigated by members of the Shrewsbury Fire and Police Departments and State Police assigned to the Office of the State Fire Marshal and to the office of Worcester District Attorney, Joseph D. Early, Jr.

Chief Vuona said, "There is no safe way to smoke inside a house where medical oxygen is in use but there are other fire risks as well. People should not use electric razors, hair dryers, or curling irons while using oxygen or get within ten feet of an open flame such as a candle, a gas stove, or woodstove."

Coan said, "Since we've been tracking these fires in 1997, there have been 85 serious fire incidents involving home oxygen, 33 deaths, 58 civilian and 7 firefighter injuries. We have had three fires in a month, two causing deaths, where home oxygen played a role." The three fires



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include the fatal Shrewsbury and Haverhill fires and a non-fatal fire in Hopedale on February 8.

The Haverhill fire at 477 Washington Street is being investigated by the Haverhill Fire and Police Departments, and State Police assigned to the Office of the State Fire Marshal and to the Office of Essex District Attorney Jonathan Blodgett. The investigation team has not made a final cause determination and the Medical Examiner's Office has not made an official identification of the victim.

Coan said, "There was medical oxygen in this home and that definitely increased the speed at which the fire developed and grew, quite possibly making escape much more difficult in a situation where seconds count." Investigators have determined that what witnesses described as an "explosion" was a bleve of an oxygen tank.

The Department of Fire Services has been running a public awareness campaign for three years on Home Oxygen Fire Safety (www.mass.gov/dfs click on Fire Safety Topics then Home Oxygen Safety.). "We are trying educate physicians that they must connect their patients to smoking cessation services when they prescribe oxygen not only for the patient's health but for the safety of everyone who might enter the building, including firefighters," said Coan. He added, "Our campaign is designed to educate patients, families, caregivers as well as physicians. We have pamphlets to facilitate that discussion between patient and caregiver, posters for patient waiting rooms and housing authorities, and materials for local fire departments to increase public awareness."